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The Emily Dickinson Journal, Volume 5, Number 2, Fall 1996, pp. 113-119  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.0.0165>



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*Emily Dickinson: Reading a Spinster*

From the time when I first began reading about Dickinson, I have always been struck by the ways in which not only her poetry but also her life has engendered an undending flow of speculations and comments. More radical and more enigmatic than anything her contemporaries Thoreau or Emerson had in mind, Dickinson's seclusion has remained a stumbling block for many of her critics. In fact, so many interpretations have been inscribed on the "Woman in White" that she could almost be taken as a paradigm of textual interpretation *per se*. Portraits of the poet as a home-bound icon (in the way Christina Rossetti tends to be presented) or as a tragic and frustrated recluse have been followed by attempts to fathom the depths of what is seen as a psychosis. Other critics have declared the poet's lifestyle to be perfectly in keeping with the values of her society, and still others have chosen to see it as a conscious act of subversion or even rebellion, the self-styled mystery cult of a radical innovator. Thus the images pinned on Dickinson range from plain to pioneering.

I do not want to try and determine the respective shares of prejudice and fact in these accounts, nor am I proposing to offer my own explanation of the poet's life in that room of her own. Rather, I would like to take a look at the figure which is, I think, hovering in the background of this biographical and psychological interest in Dickinson: the woman alone, the "old maid," the "spinster." Feminist researchers and critics (Nina Auerbach, Laura Doan, Sheila Jeffreys, Martha Vicinus, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg) have recently scrutinized the stereotypes that adhere to this figure and have developed more differentiated accounts of the single woman in the nineteenth century and her social significance. It is in this context that I would like to consider some aspects of Dickinson's poetry. My point is that Dickinson in several ways epitomizes central concerns of other single

women of her time; that she is, in fact, an exemplary “spinster,” albeit perhaps neither a “little home-keeping person” (Crowe Ransom 89) nor a “blasphemously female ‘Word made Flesh’” (Gilbert 39).

In the American colonial population, the number of spinsters was negligible. In a society that fiercely upheld the social order of marriage and family life most women married before the age of twenty-three, and those who did not frequently had to bear suspicion and condemnation. In the antebellum period, however, the percentage rose quite rapidly to “7.3 percent for women born between 1835–38, 8.0 percent for those born between 1845–49, 8.9 percent for 1855–59” (Chambers-Schiller 3). In New England, one of the reasons behind that shift was a demographic iniquity: more men migrated to the West than women. (The 1851 census in England revealed a similar imbalance, due to male migration to the colonies. It was in this context that the terms “surplus” or “excess” women were created as the official designation of spinsters [Jeffreys 86].) Women on their part tended to follow employment opportunities, and almost three quarters of the total “surplus” of women were concentrated in six Massachusetts counties that featured manufacturing or commercial centers (Chambers-Schiller 30). However, the unmarried woman was less a social issue among the working population than in well-to-do circles where marriage and family life was the only viable option for women.<sup>1</sup> Here, other, perhaps less tangible, factors influenced the rate of marriage. One of them was the improvement of education for women, which had its origin in the growing need for a literate population and the ensuing demand for teachers, as well as in the belief that better education would secure upward social mobility (Smith-Rosenberg 247). Moreover, there were decided changes in the idea of marriage. Shifts in the economic structure had made both men and women less dependent on the family unit, and as a consequence patriarchal authority in regard to marriage declined. Partners were now chosen more freely, and many women questioned the distribution of roles and rights in married life more openly (Palmieri 599). Marriage was seen in terms of a subordinating relationship women could not accept, and it was experienced as linked to an unbearable loss of identity on the part of the woman (attitudes with which readers of Dickinson are surely familiar; e.g., P732, “She rose to His Requirement — dropt / The Playthings of Her Life”). New England women shared these attitudes with a great number of their contemporaries in the Old World: Florence Nightingale, for example, protested against women’s subordination to husband and family in *Cassandra* (1852). In her private notes she vowed to strive after a better life for women and sighed: “Oh God, no more love. No more marriage, O God” (qtd. in Cook 1: 102).

Manuals for young women warned them to take extreme care in selecting a partner, and accordingly, singlehood, which had been considered such a dreadful fate in colonial America, gained esteem. Quite a number of women did not stay single by force but by choice, contending that, as Catharine M. Sedgewick writes in her novel, *Married or Single?* (1857), “that there might be golden harvests reaped in the fields of single life, that it was not a condition to be dreaded, scorned, or pitied, but infinitely preferable to the bankruptcies of married life” (qtd. in Chambers-Schiller 16). By refusing to compromise herself, a single woman, it was thought, “conducted herself with the most perfect propriety, and [acted] a much more virtuous and honorable part in society [than an unhappily married woman]” (Charles Brockton Brown, qtd. in Chambers-Schiller 17).

Unmarried life, in fact, came to be regarded as both a socially and personally valuable state, and in middle-class circles there evolved a veritable “Cult of Single Blessedness” (Chambers-Schiller 10), a second powerful myth next to the Cult of Domesticity. Rooted in the religious tradition of New England, which had always put emphasis on the primacy of the individual soul and on individual salvation, this myth associated celibacy with spiritual growth and refinement, at times even with sainthood. One social commentator, Artemus B. Muzzey, wrote in 1840 about the future of a young maiden: “She ranks with the glorious sisterhood, who have gone to the rest of the sainted. Let her soul be baptized into the spirit of God, let his glory be the seal of her deeds, and she shall at length join that great company, who ‘neither marry, nor are given in marriage,’ but are as the angels of God” (25). Similarly Elizabeth Blackwell, one of the first women to enter the medical profession in the US, said she was “taking the veil” when she started to devote her life to medicine (qtd. in Chambers-Schiller 21). The prescriptive and didactic literature of the times, as well as spinsters’ diaries and letters, show that unmarried women were seen, and saw themselves, as the truly “Dedicated sort” (P273), as members of what they called the “maiden sisterhood” (Chambers-Schiller 21). The sense of election that pervades Emily Dickinson’s poetry, as well as the images she uses to convey it (“A solemn thing — it was — I said — / A Woman — white — to be — / And wear — if God should count me fit — / Her blameless mystery —,” P272), are characteristic of the discourse of single women of her time.<sup>2</sup> It is a sense of election that conveys power (in Dickinson’s case the awe-inspiring power of her art, “The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise —,” P657). The spinster was indeed exalted as a great soul “set apart from the mass of common, married humanity” (Auerbach 136), a “Columnar Self —” (P789), so that in 1870, Mrs. Horace Mann could state: “I believe it is a fact that the higher the state of civilization and

refinement, the more unmarried women there are" (qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg 264). This attitude of course carried the nineteenth-century ideology of women's greater moral purity and lesser sexual drive to an extreme: the spinster's power rested precisely on her celibacy. When Barbara Mossberg states that "according to Dickinson's aesthetics, she [Dickinson] must retain her virginity and obscurity or she will lose her 'gifts'" (Mossberg 182), she describes an attitude that was central to the ways in which single women thought about themselves.

"Title divine — is mine!" (P1072), these spinsters could have exclaimed with Emily Dickinson. For most of them their status as a chosen being meant that they dedicated themselves to a "noble cause": as has often been noted in connection with Dickinson's own choice of taking refuge in her room, spinsters were expected to make themselves useful in the family and the town community, and those who looked beyond that circle frequently went into teaching, missionary work or nursing<sup>3</sup> (especially during the Civil War). However, this sense of mission had more immediate personal aspects. If these women, like Dickinson in P303, chose "one" and then "closed the Valves of [their] attention," this was a vocation, a vocational identity. The determination of the poet choosing her own crown in "I'm ceded — I've stopped being Theirs," (P508) is representative of the efforts of many spinsters, even if they chose a more community-oriented life. (Florence Nightingale noted in her private journals: "A profession, a trade, a necessary occupation, something to fill and employ all my faculties, I have always felt essential to me, I have always longed for, consciously or not" [Cook 1: 106].) Under exacting conditions, in foreign countries or on the traumatizing battlefields of the Civil War, these women found a sense of individual advancement, of purpose and of strength. Like Dickinson, they reached toward the creation of an identity, toward self-discovery, autonomy, the expansion of their faculties. Serving and caring, they enacted the myth of the disembodied and benign woman to perfection but at the same time subverted it by discovering and creating new selves, much like Dickinson subverted her own role of the dutiful daughter to assert herself as a poet.

In connection with Dickinson's poetry it is interesting to note that for many of these women *suffering* was a way of breaking through their socially prescribed roles into something more authentic, perhaps also more sensual. Florence Nightingale exclaims in *Cassandra*: "Give us back our suffering, we cry to heaven in our hearts — suffering rather than indifferentism; for out of nothing comes nothing. But out of suffering may come the cure" (Nightingale 29). As if to illustrate this statement, a young woman, Cornelia Hancock, wrote from the Gettysburg battlefield: "What I do here [one]

would think would kill at home, but I am well and comfortable" (qtd. in Chambers-Schiller 54). Confrontation with suffering seems to have represented a liberation, a way to a more truthful self and full life and a possibility to create a context of private semantic amplitude and significance to set against the social context of meaning which for these women was constricting and insufficient.

"I took my Power in my Hand — / And went against the World —" (P540): the election of the self, its discovery and development, however closely linked to ideas of serving the community, was in most cases inevitably problematic. Although the "Cult of Single Blessedness" exalted self-determined spinsters, the reality of social expectations was different, and in a community in which marriage and motherhood were widely upheld as a woman's true fulfillment single women found themselves outside existing social structures, often tortured by feelings of guilt about what seemed a selfish and reckless repudiation of the demands of society. Emily Dickinson's puzzling poetic "I," at times confident, arrogant, boisterous, and then again insignificant, dependent, oppressed, and powerless, is strikingly similar to the ways in which other nineteenth century spinsters represented themselves and embodies the central tensions of single women's lives. In the "spinster code," in fact, self-fulfillment seems inevitably linked to self-annulment, expression to repression. This also shows, for example, in the attitudes of these unmarried women towards the patriarchal society in which they lived, and against which they tried to assert themselves. Since fathers retained responsibility for women until they married (Chambers-Schiller 107), nineteenth century spinsters were legally daughters for a lifetime, and often their identity as daughters remained a determining psychological factor as well. ("What shall I be without my Father?" was George Eliot's desperate question at the death of her father; as Nina Auerbach has pointed out, she wrote "be," not "do" [Auerbach 188].) For single women of the time attempts to rebel against the patriarchal system that eclipsed them were often accompanied by a willingness to submit themselves to an authority. A striking fictionalized account of this aspect of the psychology of spinsterhood is found in Charlotte Brontë's highly autobiographical novel *Villette* (1853), in which Lucy Snowe's rebellion against her male-dominated environment is paired with her adoration for the strong, even tyrannical M. Paul. Many spinsters furthermore tended to choose extremely exacting occupations, devoting themselves to causes which were often physically straining and absorbed their entire energy. It is as if they tried to inflict, obliquely, the very pressures on themselves which they sought to escape. Dickinson's radical seclusion, her formidable but somehow forbidding way of focusing her life on her art, as well as her way of

putting herself in relation to a stern, exacting male presence ("He;" the "Master"), express a grim conflict that was determining for the lives of many single women of her time.

Not surprisingly, this issue was linked to the experience of a split, dis-integrated self. For spinsters, their place outside the main social structure meant a certain freedom from prescribed roles and tasks and the liberty, albeit within limits, to try out new roles, to forge new identities for themselves. On the other hand, it entailed the danger of either being thrown into a chaos of identity or of not being able to accommodate conflicting roles within the self. The spinsters' identities as women (and daughters) and the responsibilities these entailed could often not be reconciled with their vocations and the positions in life to which they aspired, and they were haunted by a sense of a multiplicity of discontinuous and unrelated "selves." At the same time, placing oneself outside the proper female sphere entailed a crisis in self-definition. For women without an officially approved status, the social system and its discourse could prove de-humanizing (Chambers-Schiller 177). Here again, Dickinson's poetry epitomizes a "spinsterly" experience: the division in her self-image (between woman and poet), which leads her to play off contradictory identities within herself and leads to a sense of a self alien to itself, a self at a distance from itself and even at war with itself. The death of a multiple self in P280, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," the encounter of one's self in "One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted —" (P670), or P642, "Me from myself — to banish — / Had I Art —": these are precise chronicles of a drama that can be recognized in numerous letters and diaries of single women.

Dickinson's poetry thus reflects experiences that are strikingly close to those of other single women of her time, capturing the predicament as well as the potentially explosive power of the spinster. In *Gyn/Ecology* (1979), Mary Daly proposes to recover and explore the original meaning of the word "spinster": a woman who spins, "participates in the whirling movement of creation, . . . spinning in a new time/space" (Daly 3). (Readers of Dickinson are perhaps reminded of P1138, "A Spider sewed at Night.") Weaving/spinning her text, Dickinson does indeed not only create *in* new spaces, but *creates* new spaces (that "brighter garden" into which she invites her brother in P2, "There is another sky"). She does this, moreover, in what could be called a "spinsterly" style: the "Dickinson Rhetoric" (Sewall 236) with its use of circumference, paradox, riddle, ellipses, and incoherences. Her poetics of "not choosing" (Cameron), her language of possibility, defy clear-cut categorization and subvert binary oppositions, much as the nineteenth-century spinster herself posed a challenge to existing gender relationships and the dynamics of dominance.

*Notes*

1. The same holds true for England, where the spinster was exclusively a middle-class issue. (As far as servants were concerned, society, on the other hand, relied on unmarried women.)
2. Florence Nightingale wanted to found "something like a Protestant sisterhood, without vows, for women with educated feelings" (Strachey 131).
3. It was thanks to the widely publicized efforts of Florence Nightingale that nursing became a respectable occupation for middle-class women.